

## May 16, 2009 - If Area is to Grow, it Needs An Airport

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If area is to grow, it needs an airport

BY BILL JONES

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Those in the nation's capital who question the value and viability of the John Murtha Johnstown-Cambria County Airport are doing so for cheap political reasons and nothing else.

Their objective can only be to smear Murtha, who has evolved as a power in the Democratic-controlled Congress, and they don't care how many they hurt to do so.

Two overpowering factors apply to the local landing field: Safety and the economic future of the region. In an area severely crippled by the demise of the steel industry and the end of large-scale coal mining, a safe and modern airport is essential to any hopes of attracting industry and commerce.

Perhaps the strongest defense of improvements made at the airport over the years is providing adequate safety for those who fly the skies in this part of Pennsylvania. Federal money spent in this endeavor has reaped a harvest.

Those who have lived in the Johnstown area for many years can remember when the stretch of mountains through Somerset

and Cambria counties was known as "The Graveyard of the Alleghenies." Plane crashes may not have been a daily affair, but they did happen several times a year, always with the loss of life.

To a large extent, the crashes involved private aviation, but not always. Among the lives lost was that of a highly ranked state official in a state-owned aircraft. If you know where to look on Laurel Mountain, between Johnstown and Ligonier, you may still find remains of the wreckage of a Navy training plane that crashed during World War II.

During my half-century as a news reporter, I covered many airplane crashes in the surrounding mountains. These many years later, I can close my eyes and vividly remember the sight of mangled bodies and the smell of burned flesh. It was not pleasant.

You can ask why we had so many aircraft tragedies in this region, and the answer is simple. We are plagued with weather patterns that change frequently, often going from scattered clouds to rain, fog and ground-hugging clouds — and back again within the space of a couple hours. Pilots would take off in clear weather 100 miles from here, and suddenly find themselves lost in a sea of fog over our mountains.

It wasn't Murtha who first sought to improve flying conditions here, but his Republican predecessor, the late John P. Saylor. Thinking both of his hometown and the flying public in general, Saylor began pressing the Federal Aviation Administration for severely needed improvements. Some other members of Congress took an interest, too, when an airliner bringing them to Johnstown for Saylor's funeral skidded off a runway upon landing here, fortunately without death or serious injury.

In the beginning, this was an airport with virtually no controls or safety considerations. Pilots had scanty information about weather conditions here. A representative of the Allegheny Airlines commuter operation, or of the fixed base operator, would go out and shine a light on the overcast and guess its altitude.

To say the least, this hit-or-miss procedure was hardly scientific, and often conditions changed drastically within the half-hour or so between sightings.

Saylor and Murtha have been aware of the life-threatening problems for aviation here. So was a former airport manager, Bill Santoro, who worked tirelessly for years to obtain desperately needed improvements that would benefit not only local aviation but transient fliers as well.

Santoro took some shortcuts his critics didn't approve of, but the airport benefited in the long run.

One of the first essentials was a flight service station, which had only advisory powers but often went beyond its stated mission to function in the absence of an airport tower. There is no way to even guess how many lives its FAA employees may have saved by going above and beyond their regular duties.

An instrument landing system was another essential that eventually was provided by the FAA because of congressional efforts. Extended runways, repaving projects, proper lighting and marking, modern electronic equipment, a new terminal building and eventually a full tower all contributed to the safety of local aviation.

Congressman Murtha has been criticized for having a local radar facility installed at our airport, a facility that has not been used. The criticism should be aimed at officials in Washington who have not seen fit to staff it. It is another safety feature of benefit to both the public and the military operations at and near the airport. I do not complain about the radar coverage provided by Cleveland Center, but an operating local radar would be desireable.

Local aviation has come a long way since pilots were landing in cow pastures, and since the first Johnstown Airport was opened and dedicated in Westwood (Edwards Hill) in the late 1920s. Many things that are essential today, because of larger, faster and more abundant aircraft, were not even dreamed of on that day 80 years ago when Amelia Earhart and other aviation pioneers came here for the dedication.

One of the current gripes about the local airport is that it is little used, but not by those who see the traffic in and out on a daily basis. If somebody sets an arbitrary figure of 1,000 enplanements a month, are those who do fly into and out of the local airport to be denied safety features because that figure is not always reached?

Our airport may be small, compared to those in large metropolitan areas, but we can take pride in its modern facilities and safety concerns.

To a large extent, we can thank Congressmen Saylor and Murtha for that. They have done a good job for us.

If I did have a complaint about Murtha and the airport, it would be that he did not request officials to name the field for Boyd "Buzz" Wagner, Johnstown's and the nation's first aviation hero of World War II.

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